

Sola Scriptura/ Scripture alone Atef Gendy

We must remind ourselves that the word *sola* means lone, only, and alone. It was used with five Reformation principles: *Sola Scriptura, Solus Christus, Sola fide, Sola Gratia*, and *Soli Deo Gloria*, which indicate that reformers faced many church problems and weaknesses in the Middle Ages for which they tried to find solutions. In the five *solas* we see in a simplified form a number of Reformation principles. For example, we see in them a summary of Luther's 95 theses. Each *sola* formed a solution to the essential challenges that the church faced at the time. For example, the teaching of *Solus Christus* met the challenge that salvation could be achieved by human beings rather than by Christ alone.

I will address in this paper the Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura*, which means Scripture Alone. This principle stresses the superiority of biblical authority over any other authority. It countered the propaganda of the pope and Catholic clergy that the church's teaching authority reached the level of the infallibility of the pope and the ecumenical councils in whatever they recognized as confessions of faith.

Luther declared clearly at the Diet of Worms in 1521, where he stood to defend himself before the imperial council led by emperor Charles V (1519- 1556), that he was ready to renounce his theses if he was proven wrong from the Bible. Luther asserted in his defense that, in the new ideas he was presenting in his movement of reform, his conscience was bound by his understanding of the Scriptures and the work of the Holy Spirit. According to the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, the Bible is the only infallible authority for faith and practice, which of course put it at odds with the ecclesiastical and theological teaching authority of the pope and the Catholic clergy.

Historical Background

The Middle Ages (roughly the years between A.D. 500 and 1500) were characterized by the development of a long and bitter struggle between the civil authority of the state (especially the emperor) and the spiritual authority of the pope and Church. When the state was stronger than the church, the church experienced interference from the emperors in the church's ecumenical councils in theological matters. Though state officials were ignorant of such matters, they contributed to the oppression of some of the church fathers or supported others for political motives, agendas, and goals. In many cases, their efforts led to the success of a particular clergy group for political reasons rather than for the integrity of their ideological positions. When the church became more powerful, some popes interfered with state affairs, opposing kings and emperors, and threatening them with the withholding of pardon for their sins. On occasion, kings had to beg for forgiveness from the popes in ways that were humiliating and unworthy of their rank.

Unfortunately, the Middle Ages witnessed not only a severe deterioration in the relationship between church and state but also between believers and the Bible. The struggle over authority, explained above, may have been a large reason for this. Popes succeeded in justifying their authority from the Bible, and they kept within the hands of the clergy the authority to teach infallibly in matters of faith and practice. Under their authority, doctrines of confession and forgiveness of sins appeared that were based on the idea that the church was given authority by Christ to "bind" and "loose." Other doctrines also appeared, such as those



affirming purgatory and papal infallibility.

The Roman Catholic Church insisted on limiting access to the Bible to the clergy. It also held that the Bible would only be available in Latin, the formal language of the state as well as the language used for the Catholic liturgy of the Mass. The Bible used by the church was the *Vulgate*, which was a Latin version translated by St. Jerome (347-420) based on the original Hebrew of the Old Testament and Greek of the New Testament. If the priests would have insisted on reading the Bible in its original languages, their position would have been justified and accepted by all. But, instead, they insisted on reading the Bible in a specific Latin translation without allowing its translation into the vernacular languages of the various Christian nations at the time. They were intransigent on this issue, withholding vernacular Bibles from the Christians of that the time. Moreover, the clergy explicitly warned the public of the danger of reading the Bible and interpreting it on their own. They held, as a pretext, that the laity was unqualified to read the Bible and that their souls would be endangered by the heretical ideas they might embrace based on their misunderstanding of the Scriptures.

The Life of Martin Luther

To understand the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, we will need to highlight some of the main points in the life of the reformer Martin Luther. Certain events in his life played an important role in the development of his interpretation of the Bible and his formulation of the doctrine of Scripture Alone – that is, the Bible is the Church's sole authority and is superior to all others.

It is well known that Luther was a student of philosophy at Erfurt University. He also studied law to please his father. Luther experienced some dramatic incidents, dangers and illnesses that influenced his academic life and, for a while, led him in the direction of monasticism. One day while he was traveling on foot from home to the university, he struggled with his fear of death and judgment. At this time it was raining heavily and a lightning bolt struck a huge tree nearby, which threw him to the ground but caused him no harm. At that time, he felt that this incident held the important message that, to please God, he must quit his position at the university and join a local Augustinian monastery. Luther mentions in one of his writings that he didn't do this because of a love of monasticism but rather because he felt that heaven — through the lightening incident — had called him specifically to this life. He writes, "I received a frightful calling from heaven, so I didn't become a monk from desire or a love of monasticism." On July 17, 1505, he sent a letter of resignation to the university, and at the same time he wrote to his father to inform him of his decision to become a monk.

While staying in the monastery, he became sick and almost died. God sent him a spiritual counselor, John Staupitz (1460- 1524), to check on him. Staupitz afforded Luther an opportunity to share with him as a counselor his fears about death and judgment. The monk reminded him of what we say in the profession of faith: "We believe in the forgiveness of sins ..." Right there, Luther's eyes could see, for the first time, God the Father as a merciful and graceful father, not just as a judge. He started thinking about Jesus Christ not just as one who condemns but as one who also forgives sin. These incidents in Luther's life were turning points that led him to his discovery of the principle of justification by faith.



Staupitz reminded Luther that God forgives sins and that the biblical words on this subject weren't just words of condolence. In the midst of Luther's distress, this was a starting point on an intellectual journey that led to his study of the word of God – especially Paul's epistle to the Romans – as well as to the writings of Augustine of Hippo. Luther's journey led to his increasing intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. Yet the journey also led him on a downward path that increased his personal sense of sin and worthlessness and to a conviction that his deeds would never measure up to God's demands. His study confirmed for him that no priest had the power to forgive sins and also that no deeds, practices, or rituals could do this for him. Luther became increasingly convinced that no man could ever grant or withhold God's forgiveness, nor could a mere man affect the destiny of another. These ideas mingled and merged in his mind as he continued to make discoveries in God's word and to be influenced by the Holy Spirit. Soon Luther developed new convictions about things like the priesthood, sacraments, good deeds, the merits of saints, the intercession of the saints, and the role of all these things in the forgiveness of sins. Amid great intellectual struggles, Luther developed convictions about church practices and doctrines that he found problematic. But what distinguishes Luther's new ideas is that they were the outcome of clear answers given in the Bible.

John Stauptiz was the dean of the new university at Wittenberg. Upon meeting the monk Luther, he saw not just an anxious young man struggling with intellectual and spiritual problems but a man of intense intelligence, strong opinion, and acute academic skills. Therefore, Stauptiz asked the young Luther to leave the Augustinian monastery and come to Wittenberg to tutor students in Aristotle's philosophy as well as biblical studies while he was completing his doctorate at Erfurt. Luther completed his theological studies with excellence, and soon he became a professor at Wittenberg. This was another turning point in his life, for it brought him closer to the Bible through studying and teaching it. In this next and perhaps most important part of his intellectual life, Luther delved into biblical studies and languages. His studies shaped his thoughts and led directly to his critique of many of the traditional beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church and can even be seen in the spiritual insights of his later more mature writing. Luther had no difficulty in correcting religious concepts he had inherited from the Catholic Church but found to be wanting in the clear light of God's word. One of the best examples we can see of this is the contrast between his early convictions on salvation and forgiveness of sins that he recorded in his 95 theses and his later convictions on salvation by faith alone that became clear to him only after he his careful exegesis of Paul's epistle to the Romans.

The Implications of the Doctrine of Sola Scriptura

Luther's faith journey cannot be understood without recognizing the Bible's importance in his life. Careful study of the Scriptures led to his discovery of what would later be seen as Reformation concepts about God, Jesus, grace, salvation, and so much more. To summarize the most important theological concepts or outcomes that follow from his belief in biblical authority as expressed in the term *Sola Scriptura*, I list seven key points:



First: The right to make pronouncements on the meaning of the Bible isn't limited to the clergy; rather, any intelligent person can understand the Bible through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Luther put this well when he announced his position at the Diet of Worms: "The God who once spoke through the mouth of an ass to rebuke Balaam is capable of speaking through a pious man [speaking about himself] to rebuke the Pope."

Second: He recognized that every man has a right to read the Bible in his own language. This conviction drove Luther to translate the Bible from the Hebrew and Greek languages into German. He began by singlehandedly translating the New Testament and later, with the help of a team of scholars, translating the Old Testament as well. This was exhausting and some phrases baffled him and his friends for days, but in the end Luther produced a renowned German Bible.

Third: Luther's translation of the Bible into German opened the door to the translation of the Bible into hundreds of languages and dialects, one of the most famous of them being the English King James Version (1611). Because of Luther's work, Bible societies andorganizations dedicated to translating the Bible were established, which led to making the Bible accessible to many people all over the world.

Fourth: Luther wrote a book specifically addressing the German nobility, explaining his position on the papacy and his objections. He focused in the book on how he held to the right of every man to read and explain the Bible. Following this, he published a book on doctrinal principles and then several commentaries of the Bible. He even published a book of sermons based on the teaching of the Bible, which presented a marvelous example to the clergy and monks of how to explain and teach the Bible. Furthermore, Luther made a unique contribution by writing hymns based on the book of Psalms, which influenced worship, changed the pattern of the Mass, and made it possible for worshipers to come to a greater appreciation of the words of the Bible by participating in the worship service though singing praises to God.

Fifth: The principle of *Sola Scriptura* had a huge impact on every aspect of the Church's life and doctrines. For Luther this principle was not just a slogan but a core intellectual conviction whose light was intended to shine on every aspect of life. His idea was embraced and intensified by subsequent reformers such as Calvin, Zwingli, and Knox as they interpreted and expounded the Scriptures, wrote hymns, crafted doctrines, taught children and adults, and organized the church in the light of its teachings.

Sixth: When the reformers came to the firm conclusion that the Bible alone was the only infallible standard for Christian faith and practice, they necessarily rejected the authority of tradition, the pope, and the clergy. The value of tradition and all the interpretations and writings through the years by church authorities were of no ultimate value if they were inconsistent with the Bible. Nevertheless, tradition is not without some value as a record of the Church's past thought and understanding of the word of God, but it can never stand alone as an independent source of faith and practice on a level of authority equal to the Bible's.



Seventh: It is clear that Luther and all the reformers focused on the authority of the Bible as the word of God and not on the doctrines of inspiration or the nature of the Bible's infallibility. The reformers simply did not look that far ahead; rather, they were concerned with the immediate need to establish the authority of the Bible over and against the Catholic Church's teachings that they believed were grounded in human tradition – that is, teachings based on the pronouncements of the popes, clergymen, or ecumenical councils. Their focus was the decisive issue of the authority of the Bible as the sole source for the Church's faith and practice. The reformers weren't concerned – as we will see in the confessions of faith produced during the Reformation era – to elaborate a doctrine of inspiration or set clear limits to biblical infallibility.

The Bible in the Reformation Era's Confessions of Faith

Geneva Confession of Faith, 1536

"First we affirm that we desire to follow Scripture alone as rule of faith and religion, without mixing with it any other thing which might be devised by the opinion of men apart from the Word of God, and without wishing to accept for our spiritual government any other doctrine than what is conveyed to us by the same Word without addition or diminution, according to the command of our Lord."

Confession of Faith of the Reformed Church in France, 1559

"As such this God reveals himself to men; firstly, in his works, in their creation, as well as in their preservation and control. Secondly, and more clearly, in his Word, which was in the beginning revealed through oracles, and which was afterward committed to writing in the books which we call the Holy Scriptures. These Holy Scriptures are comprised in the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments ... We know these books to be canonical, and the sure rule of our faith, not so much by the common accord and consent of the Church, as by the testimony and inward illumination of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to distinguish them from other ecclesiastical books upon which, however useful, we cannot found any articles of faith ... We believe that the Word contained in these books has proceeded from God, and receives its authority from him alone, and not from men. And inasmuch as it is the rule of all truth, containing all that is necessary for the service of God and for our salvation, it is not lawful for men, nor even for angels, to add to it, to take away from it, or to change it. Whence it follows that no authority, whether of antiquity, or custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgments, or proclamations, or edicts, or decrees, or councils, or visions, or miracles, should be opposed to these Holy Scriptures, but, on the contrary, all things should be examined, regulated, and reformed according to them. And therefore we confess the three creeds, to wit: the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian, because they are in accordance with the Word of God."

The Scots Confession, 1560

"We believe and confess the Scriptures of God sufficient to instruct and make perfect the man of God, so do we affirm and avow their authority to be from God, and not to depend on men or angels. We affirm, therefore, that those who say the Scriptures have no other authority save that which they have received from the Kirk [Church] are blasphemous against God and injurious to the true Kirk, which always hears and obeys the voice of her own Spouse and Pastor, but takes not upon her to be mistress over the same.



Challenges Posed by the Principle of Sola Scriptura

Although we find many great benefits from the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, there are also many challenges that arose and still arise from it, suggesting that churches that have sprung from the Reformation need to exercise caution in applying it.

That the Church should neglect tradition was not at all the intention of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation. Their intention was not to abandon church tradition but simply to set the Scriptures above it as an authority by which to judge all human teachings. How Reformation churches deal with tradition remains an extremely sensitive manner. Though the Bible records the life of the Lord Jesus and the early church, its accounts were not written during Christ's life on earth but after his ascension by his disciples who relied to some extent on the faithful preservation of Christ's teachings through an oral tradition. Church tradition includes not only the early history of God's people Israel and the early years of the church of Christ but also the Church's subsequent struggle to understand and interpret the sacred word. The church continues to need to distinguish between what is true and what is false in its own tradition according to the extent to which it is consistent with the Scriptures. So, it is best not to reject tradition but to respect it, read it, study it and benefit from it, examining it at every turn in the light of the Bible and not *vice versa*.

Once again, the best gift we can give the world— often together with education and evangelization—is to make the Bible available to everyone so that all may learn the path of salvation and grow in grace. But at the same time the church must offer help from those skilled in biblical interpretation so that the non-specialized will be protected from misunderstanding. The church should always serve the world in this way and never abandon the pulpit to the uneducated. Sadly, we see this at times in some local churches in which heresies spread and false doctrines are proclaimed concerning Christ, salvation, sanctification, and other subjects.

The Bible should bring us closer to each other, unifying those who believe in its authority. Instead, we often see varying biblical interpretations lead to divisions in the church. Yet if we follow enlightened principles of interpretation, we should come to correct conclusions about the Bible and theology, which will lead to Christianity unity.

Sometimes, we are drawn into futile arguments about the nature of inspiration, which inevitably leads some into a desperate desire to defend the validity and authenticity of every word in the Bible as they imagine that this is the way to apply the Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura*. In contrast, the approach presented here emphasizes the authority of the sacred word for faith and works, not its inspiration. It follows that the best way to apply the principle of *Sola Scriptura* is to use every possible means to present the teachings of the Bible – in translations, commentaries, and sermons – in ways that are consistent with the best scholarship of our time.

Let the Bible then be used to evangelize the whole world. Let it be taught to young and old in the Church. Let it be obeyed by all believers. But let us refrain from making it the object of philosophical and academic arguments.



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Dr. Gendy is the President of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo and a professor of New Testament.